

# Fetal alcohol syndrome: What you should know about drinking during pregnancy



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## Is it safe to drink alcohol while I am pregnant?

- When a woman drinks alcohol while she is pregnant, the alcohol goes to the baby through her bloodstream. Drinking alcohol during pregnancy can cause fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS), a serious condition that can affect a child throughout life.
- Children with FAS have problems with development, learning, behaviour and social skills.
- Is there a safe amount of alcohol to consume while pregnant? It's not known, so it's best to have none.
- What is known is that the more alcoholic drinks a pregnant woman has, the more damage may be done to her baby.
- Binge drinking – having five or more alcoholic drinks at a time – is very dangerous for an unborn baby.

## How can I prevent FAS?

- **If you are thinking about getting pregnant**, it's best to stop drinking alcohol now. Then you'll know for sure that your baby will be safe from FAS.

Women who find it hard to stop drinking, or who already have a child with FAS, should get help before getting pregnant. Some communities have support programs where women help other women to stop drinking or cut down.

- **If you are already pregnant**, the best thing is to stop drinking alcohol completely.

If you find it too hard to stop, try to drink less often, or have fewer drinks at a time. Every time you choose not to drink, you're helping your baby.

If you are pregnant and can't stop drinking by yourself, ask someone for help. Your doctor, local FAS support group or local clinic can help find the right program for you.

- Men can help their partners by not drinking alcohol, or by reducing the amount that they do drink.

## What happens to babies whose mothers drink during pregnancy?

Babies exposed to alcohol before they are born may:

- be smaller than other babies; and
- have slight differences in their faces – small or narrow eyes, and a thin or flat upper lip.

Babies exposed to large amounts of alcohol before birth may go through withdrawal in the first few weeks of life. This withdrawal often starts before they leave the hospital. Symptoms of withdrawal include:

- extreme irritability (or fussiness);
- tremors or shaking;
- feeding problems; and
- diarrhea.

They may also have problems with their heart rates, breathing or digestion.

Many babies exposed to alcohol during pregnancy are fussy and find it hard to settle. This problem may last for years. These babies may also have problems sleeping.

## Does FAS go away?

The symptoms of FAS last a lifetime, but may change as the child gets older.

**Toddlers** with FAS may be:

- hyperactive;
- unable to follow simple instructions;
- much too friendly, even to strangers; and
- delayed in their development.

FAS in **school-aged children** may lead to:

- learning difficulties, including problems reading;
- difficulty paying attention;
- behaviour problems in the classroom; and

- falling behind in school.

Because of these problems, children with FAS often have low self-esteem. They do best with an education program that is tailored to their needs.

### **What should I do if I think my child has FAS?**

Provinces and territories have resources for identifying children with FAS. If you think that your child has FAS, ask your doctor for an assessment or referral.

To determine whether your child has FAS, a doctor will ask questions about:

- whether you drank during pregnancy and how much;
- how your child behaves;
- how your child is doing in school; and
- your child's learning problems.

Not all children exposed to alcohol before being born will have 'full' FAS. But they may still have problems.

Children with 'partial' FAS or other alcohol-related disorders will also need support at home and school, similar to children who have FAS.

### **Will children with FAS always have problems?**

FAS does last a lifetime, but if children with FAS are identified early, and if they get support, they'll be less likely to have problems later in life.

Some of the problems that teenagers or adults with FAS experience are:

- mental health problems;
- inappropriate sexual behaviour;
- bad experiences in school;
- trouble with the law; and
- drug or alcohol abuse.

Early intervention is important to reduce the chances that children born with FAS will have serious problems when they get older.

### **Where can I get more information or support?**

**Drinking during pregnancy:** The Motherisk Helpline is a toll-free, bilingual telephone service that provides information and counselling on alcohol or substance use during pregnancy: 1-877-FAS-INFO (1-877-327-4636).

**FAS resources:** The FAS/FAE Information Service has a bilingual Web site and telephone service that provides links to support groups, prevention projects, resource centres and experts on fetal alcohol syndrome and fetal alcohol effects in Canada. English Web site <<http://www.ccsa.ca/fasgen.htm>>, French Web site <<http://www.ccsa.ca/fasgenf.htm>>, telephone 1-800-559-4514.

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